MENTORING among Native Americans

Does it work?

by Michael J. Major

Mentoring is but another example of a venerable Native American value that has diminished in this Anglo-Saxon-dominated society. There are some positive indications, however, that this value may be re-emerging under a somewhat different guise.

Mentoring has been an integral part of Indian society, one which long predated the arrival of whites. Mike Clements, a Wasco and general manager of education at Warm Springs Indian Reservation in Oregon explains, "We look to the elders in our society for their wisdom. In this respect, mentoring is what is passed on from one generation to the next. As people go through life and learn more, they teach the younger generation to listen, to pay attention, to learn from their experience, and to preserve their heritage." In some tribes, the parents' only duty was to give their children unconditional love, while it was up to an uncle or other members of the family to provide the discipline or to teach skills like hunting.

Gordon Regguinti, an Anishinabe and executive director of the Native American Journalistic Association of Minneapolis, says that mentoring—an elder guiding a young person through rites of passage—is a crucial need. "But in the 1800s and 1900s," he says, "when the Indian ways of life were coming under attack, communities were gutted out, resulting in many social ills and generations being cut off from one another. There were often not enough people who remained who could serve as role models or mentors." Clements points out that elders often encouraged the best and the brightest of the younger generation to leave the reservation, get an education, and learn how to adapt to white society. "They recognized it simply as a matter of survival," he says.

But, as explains Suzan Shown Harjo who is both Cheyenne and Muscogee, Native Americans are still in a survival mode. Harjo is president of both the Morning Star Foundation and the 1992 Alliance, two Indian organizations based in Washington, D.C. According to the organizations, from 1492 until 1500, 8 million of the indigenous people of the Caribbean died, either of diseases brought by the Europeans or by violence at their hands.

At the time of Columbus, Harjo says the most conservative estimate of the native populations in what are now the contiguous 48 United States was about 50 million. By 1900, there were only 250,000 NativeAmericans. "Now the number is 2 million, so it takes a long time to catch up," she says. "But Native Americans are still in a very vulnerable situation." Harjo cited two reasons why.

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The first is that Indian people are still not rid of, or prepared to cope with, diseases such as tuberculosis, smallpox, or influenza, which are largely eradicated in much of the world, but still result in plague-like conditions on reservations. Representing about 6 percent of the U.S. population, Native Americans have the highest infant mortality rates and the highest incidence of HIV of any minority group.

The second reason has to do with the devastating effects of negative self-image, manifested in high

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unemployment, widespread alcoholism, and the highest rate of suicide of any minority group. “We're not in luxury position, but rather an emergency survival mode,” says Harjo.

That being the case, it's not difficult to see why mentoring and the building of positive role models are so vitally important to Indian people. In modern context, mentoring takes on a variety of meanings. In terms of traditional culture, it means the rebuilding of the generational bonds, the elders passing on their tribe's heritage to preschool through college-aged offspring.

But mentoring is also taking on a distinctly nontraditional meaning. This has to do with preparing the youth, again of all ages, with the skills necessary to cope in the white world. These mentors are Indians who have found a professional niche in the white world. Upon returning to a reservation, or while remaining in their professional situations, they provide advice and moral support to help young Indian men and women navigate through the cultural thickets of college as well as providing help in the job search and adapting to the vagaries of corporate “culture.”

Does the traditional value of mentoring, applied in the modern context, actually work? Or is it simply a nice idea that really hasn't been able to bridge the chasm between two very disparate cultures?

One observer who doesn't give mentoring high marks is Norbert Hill, an Oneida and executive director of the American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES) in Boulder, Colorado. “I've designed plenty of mentoring programs, and have found that they just don't work,” Hill says. “You can't simply get out your New York and Chicago phone books and match people up. It's like a mail-order bride. Mentoring is about a relationship. Unless the chemistry and spontaneity are there, it just won't work.”

By contrast, Hill says he has seen some mentoring programs work when the age and geographical differences are minimized. For example, college students mentoring in a nearby reservation or high school students mentoring younger kids on the same reservation. But when any kind of distances are involved, Hill says, “I can guarantee that first meeting, but how do you get people to show up for the second? That's the question. Mentoring is not a computer match. You can't do it by telephone.”

The fact that mentoring is so intensely a tribal tradition is exactly what makes it so difficult to achieve across tribes. Andrea Smith is a Makah and regional coordinator for the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians (ATNI) in Portland, Oregon. She recalls that after finishing college and working for companies such as IBM and Nordstrom, she was assigned to work with a tribe in South Dakota. “You have to have patience in Indian country and commit for five or ten years,” she says. “But I'm from the Northwest and didn't want to be away from home for that long.” So she returned to the Northwest where she is doing her own mentoring while being mentored by her tribal leaders.

Jo Ellen Rogers, the placement director at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, sums up the situation when she says, “The mentoring program is great, but we've not had a lot of major successes because of the distance involved.”

Ernest Robinson, director of the Counseling and Career Center at Northeastern State, reports that there have been problems closer to home. “We've tried to have mentoring as a part of freshmen orientation, not only for Indians but also for every person of color, but nothing has come of it,” he says. One problem, according to Robinson, has to do with selecting the proper criteria for a mentor. “It doesn't help to choose someone who has good grades but really doesn't care about someone else,” he says. But the main problem is funding. Robinson believes the mentors should be paid, but the money did not become available as anticipated. He adds, however, that he hopes to try again the next school year. “There is a critical need,” Robinson says. “It's well established that many minority students, if they don't get the support, just drop out.”

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Regguinti of the Native American Journalistic Association agrees that there is a tremendous need. “There is much work to do in Indian country, and there are just not enough counselors to serve as role models,” he says. “Occasionally, in my work as a journalist, I'm able to help someone out of high school. But it's hard to keep the long-range relationship going. There is a need to keep my own work and my own family going, as well as the distance. It's very difficult to sustain things.” One activity Regguinti does sustain, in addition to his journalism, is writing and editing a series of children's books showing young Native Americans interacting with the traditional community through things like harvesting wild rice and making pottery.

Role modeling is also important in the Chickasaw Nation of Ada, Oklahoma. The director of the Office of Public Information, Lona Barrick, says, “We're specifically putting role models in our paper, not necessarily a senator or someone who's walked on the moon, but Chickasaws who have accomplished something with their lives whom our younger people can look up to.”

The propagation of role models is directly related to the rise of a number of successful programs which Barrick calls “indirect monitoring.” These range from head-start programs for preschoolers to “world-of-work” programs on matters such as job skills training and the development of communication and interview skills. The Chickasaw Youth Council promotes activities designed to motivate youth, give them coping skills, and make them proud of their heritage.

The Chickasaws are different from many other tribes in that they do not live on the reservations, but rather have their lands in trusts where their businesses, clinics, and hospitals are located in 11 different counties. The Chickasaw programs are often offered in conjunction with those from the federal Johnson O'Malley Act that provides tutoring, financial aid and other help to Indian youth through the schools. “Most of our

students are mainstreamed into the schools," Barrick says. "The mentoring is not necessarily connected to just one person, although that probably happens in some cases."

The various programs have been going for about five or six years, but have suddenly taken off in the past two years. Barrick notes that during this time there has been a resurgence in Indian pride all across the nation, occasioned, ironically, by the Columbus Quincentennial. "There is an increased awareness throughout the nation that we do not want to be considered a forgotten people," Barrick says. "A newly awakened pride in our heritage and selves relates directly to our efforts to enhance the self-esteem of our youth." Barrick adds that at the same time a variety of programs are growing to help Indian youth adapt to the white world, new programs are also developing to reconnect the youth with their heritage, such as classes in Indian dances and language, and mentoring in the traditional way.

But if there is a resurgence of mentoring taking place on Indian homelands in a variety of guises, is there any hope for continuity once the young person leaves home to go to college or get a job?

Steve Salway, an Oglala Lakota and director of Placement and Career Services at New Mexico State University, reports that his campus has a number of programs, such as American Indian Studies and American Indian Resources, designed to help new students find a sense of identity in the new surroundings. These programs also provide peer counseling and serve as a liaison for financial services.

Salway says that mentoring happens but acknowledges "not to the degree that it should happen." He lists a number of variables, including the culture shock of a youth arriving from a rural setting often with inferior secondary education. But Salway maintains that efforts simply have to be increased on this level.

"You can't have too much of a good thing," he says. "The more help the better. The first couple of semesters are critical in terms of retention and combining dropout. If you can get past that first year, the chances of continuing are dramatically increased."

From there, the chances for the Indian student to complete his/her education and to start a career are getting better due to an unlikely source—corporate America. Affirmative action hiring and cultural diversity in the work force are more than buzz words and, in fact, represent a process of dynamic cultural change, Salway says.

The primary motivations are not necessarily idealistic. Corporations have found it to be a considerable expense to maintain a high turnover rate. It has been estimated that a new hire costs a company from $3,500 to $4,000, exclusive of training costs. "Many companies were targeting minorities , but then not making any effort to retain them," says Salway. "This proved to be expensive."

A second factor, he says, has been the belated discovery that minorities make up a sizeable market to which companies can sell their products. "Corporations know they lack credibility if they are trying to reach a minority group but don't have a diverse work force."

What this means, says Salway, is that corporations are attempting to attract and to hold minority employees. This is done through internship and co-op programs in college, job recruiting programs, and special retention and career development programs once the person is hired.

Part of this is mentoring and corporations are building mentors into their institutional structure. "At that point I don't think it matters whether the mentor is an Indian or not," Salway says. At the same time, he adds that over the past ten years more and more Indians have graduated and gone into business and government. "So now there is a pool of professionals who can serve as mentors, whereas in previous times the number was much smaller."

Therefore, Salway advises Indian students to network through the student chapters of their professional organizations and to add to the list of interview questions, "Does the company provide mentoring for new employees?"

It can be said that mentoring today, like many other kinds of relationships, is much more difficult than it was in the past. But there is, from many sides, an increasing awareness of the need for and commitment to mentoring, thereby improving conditions for its success.

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